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# VIRGINIA WOOLF: TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

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# The Heteroglossia of History

*Melba Cuddy-Keane, Natasha Aleksiuk, Kay Li, Morgan Love, Chris Rose, Andrea Williams*

The Heteroglossia of History, Part One: The Car

## Prefatory Note

The following paper grew out of a year-long graduate seminar at the University of Toronto entitled "Virginia Woolf, History, and Historicism." In the first term, the course proceeded in a traditional way, with a predetermined syllabus based on works by Virginia Woolf interlaced with theoretical readings on historiography and historicism. In the second term, the seminar made a radical shift into a collaborative research project and the syllabus developed in response to topics and questions that emerged as we read through Woolf's diaries, letters, and essays from the years 1926-1928. Collaboration was called into play not only because the group began jointly to research common topics but also because both the direction of the course and the specific readings were determined by instructor and students together. Aside from the frequent tendency for the seminar to adjourn to a local coffee shop after class, the collaboration was facilitated by an on-line listserve for the course that allowed discussion to continue via email between meetings.

By February, we were far enough along to submit a conference proposal but, in keeping with the collaborative approach, we decided not to develop separate and independent papers. Almost all parts of our paper were written by two—usually three—people, and all material underwent editorial revision by the whole group. The instructor's previous work on

*Between the Acts* and her interpretation of the playwright La Trobe as a "catalyst" rather than "leader" figure provided a model for countering an instructor's potentially excessive authorial intrusions.

The performative and multi-media aspects of the presentation are hard to capture in print, as is the way we divided our reading of the text among different voices.[1] What we present here, then, is a "digest" version of our introduction and one of the paper's three sections.

## Introduction

Throughout her life, Virginia Woolf challenged traditional approaches that limit history to political or constitutional events, or to the great (public) lives of great (famous) men. Her own historical scope included the "Lives of the Obscure" and the details of the everyday; furthermore, she posited a continuity between the words of the everyday and the writing of literature. In the Paston letters, she discovered "the very language" that Chaucer heard, and so understood why he wrote *The Canterbury Tales* instead of *King Lear* (*E*4 35). And despite her early reputation as a formalist, she humorously dismissed a pure and acontextual notion of art: "literature did undoubtedly once lie down with life, and all her progeny, being the result of that misalliance are more or less impure. To understand them we must live. And then ... who can say where life ends and literature begins?" (*E*3 141).

Following Woolf's lead, we too trouble the boundary between text and context, exploring the relation between Woolf's literary works and the social discourse of the time. We challenge as well the isolation of "high" from "low" culture, exploring a range of Woolf's writing—fiction, diaries, letters, and essays—along with examples of contemporaneous social discourse such as *The Times*, *The Morning Post*, and *Vogue*.[2] Our decision to focus on the motor car, fashion, and photography emerged from our reading of Woolf's texts, but studying the popular forms led us to see that, in the 1920s, these three areas were all sites of significant cultural transformation, expansion, and growth.

Appropriately for collaborative work, our project was influenced by Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia—the varied and opposing voices that disrupt traditional univocal constructions of meaning. Drawing on Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic, we tried both to pay attention to the diversity of interests and approaches in our group and to acknowledge the conflicting forces at play in the relation between Woolf's texts and the surrounding social discourses. We asked how Woolf is an agent as well as a product of her times, examining the ways she both resisted and succumbed to normative cultural standards. In doing so, we sought the kind of balance advocated by Dominick LaCapra, who argues that while literary texts can be read as symptomatic of their culture, they possess transformative possibilities as well (4).

Finally, in considering Woolf's double-positioning, we drew on Michel de Certeau's distinction between strategies and tactics. According to de Certeau, strategies are employed by those in visible positions of power, while tactics are the maneuvers of the disempowered. A strategy is possible when a subject (such as an advertising agency) occupies a position of power and will distinct from its environment (such as its target audience). The strategy has a space of its own from which to manage the distanced and targeted Other. A tactic, on the other hand, has no solid or permanent space but must opportunistically seize the space of its strategic Other. The tactic is thus constantly shifting, poaching in the cracks of the strategic system (35-7).

De Certeau argues that consumers may construct "partly unreadable paths" using the products of commodity culture to undermine the cultural norms from within. The subversive impact of Woolf's tactics as a consumer, we argue, lies in her recombination, resituation and rhetorical use of such material goods as cars, clothing, and cameras.

## 1. Background: de Certeau and the Railway

Michel de Certeau's analysis of the railroad suggests that a mode of travel can both encode regulatory practices and be the site of liberatory individual dreams. As de Certeau first states, the railway disciplines the individual by imposing a mechanistic order: "The unchanging traveler is pigeonholed, numbered and regulated in the grid of the railway car, which is a perfect actualization of the rational utopia" (111). And the organization of the body is both literal and textual, an articulation of both a physical discipline and a narrative structure: "Every being is placed there like a piece of printer's type on a page arranged in military order ... the condition of both a railway car's and a text's movement from one place to another." But de Certeau then presents the railroad as a paradox of imprisonment and freedom: while the railway carriage organizes its passengers into compartments constrained to a fixed and linear grid, the separation of the traveler from the exteriority outside the window, the "silence" of the world placed at a distance, frees the mind to wander in "unknown landscapes and the strange fables of our private stories" (112). Tactics disrupt strategies: "The 'speculative' returns, located in the very heart of the mechanical order" (113).

Virginia Woolf was herself aware of the cultural implications of the railroad, although she playfully parodies its representative significance for the Victorians by listing "Railway, the" in her mock index to *Orlando*. But, in more serious ways, she frequently aligns modes of travel with modes of thought and, like de Certeau, she discovers in the railroad possibilities for both constraint and freedom. On the one hand, like the Victorian humanists, Woolf links the railway with rational modes of thought because of the linear grid—like Mr. Ramsay's alphabet—of the straight iron track. Writing to Jacques Raverat in 1924, Woolf explains, "the falsity of

the past (by which I mean Bennett, Galsworthy and so on) is precisely I think that they adhere to a formal railway line of sentence" (*L*3 135). Here, the railway functions as a trope for a rigidly-controlled textual and conceptual order. An earlier piece of writing, however, shows Woolf aware of the possibly liberatory effects of technological achievement. In a 1908 essay, comparing the train to the displaced stage-coach, she writes, "surely it is time that someone should sing the praises of express trains ... their speed is the speed of lyric poetry, inarticulate as yet, sweeping rhythm through the brain ... " (*E*1 222). Taken together, these passages indicate that, while Woolf could see the regulatory order imposed by a technological system, like de Certeau she could see the possibilities for freedom in the user's response. A similar dialectic emerges in her representation of the car.

## 2. The Car in Social Discourse

Just as the railroad changed both the demographic face of Victorian England and its cultural modes of thinking, so the automobile was both a representative sign and a determining cause of the modern age. From its official beginning in an odd-looking contraption built by Karl Benz in 1885, the automobile quickly grew to become a dominant influence on the modern world. As a luxury item, it helped further to entrench the class differences that had grown out of the industrial economy of the 19th Century; as the harnessing and unleashing of a potentially dangerous energy, it instigated a long series of new regulatory practices: speed limitations, traffic regulations, and licensing requirements. But in addition, like the railroad it introduced new possibilities for the movement of goods and bodies, and therefore new ways of constructing and organizing space, altering once again the subjective perception of time and distance and introducing new trajectories for conceptual mappings.

By the mid-1920s, the car had become a prominent feature of everyday life. And while affordable models were available for middle-class families, the industry responded quickly to the desires of the wealthy elite. Advertisements of the time assured prospective owners of a particular model's luxury and solid respectability; illustrations went further to indulge, in Gatsby-like fashion, in associations of glamour and excitement. And the rapid acceptance of the car was not without economic motives. According to a 1925 article in *The Morning Post*, the uniform opposition in the House of Commons at the time of the restrictive Motor Act of 1903 had, by the mid-20s, been transformed into consolidated support, not least because of the need to aid the British motor industry by establishing protective tariffs. The discourse of motoring thus became entangled with the discourse of empire and nationalism, and typical advertisements urged the consumer to "Buy British Goods" or to evidence patriotism by buying BP—"British Petrol." A luxury item, a symbol of status and wealth, and indisputably British—it is not surprising that a car serves at

the beginning of *Mrs. Dalloway* as an anonymous "symbol of state," or that another car—low, powerful, and grey—later stands sentry to Sir William Bradshaw's house.

## 3. Woolf and the Car

At the time of writing *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf represented the car in primarily negative terms, opposing not only its connotations of imperialism and class privilege, but also quite literally what she saw as its destructive intrusion on the British countryside. In a brief contribution to the *Nation & Athenaeum* in 1924, Woolf declared that "The cheapening of motor-cars is another step towards the ruin of the country road," and she proceeded to attack a practice designed for the exclusive benefit of "a population seemingly in perpetual and frantic haste not to be late for dinner" (*E*3 440). Woolf thus linked the car to a negative change in the organization of the countryside—the replacement of ancient meandering country roads with straight hard blacktop—and she deplored the inevitable effects on the quality and pace of life.

But while the socialist and the pedestrian might position herself in opposition to the car, the driver/passenger was situated otherwise—a shift that relates to Woolf's distinctively different representation of the car in *Orlando*. While we are not positing a single cause for the change in approach, studying Woolf's everyday life brought our attention to a significant event: in the summer of 1927, Virginia and Leonard bought their first car and Virginia experienced for herself the sensations of driving. And Woolf's shift from pedestrian to driver is quickly followed by her shift from figuring the car as symbol of a class and gendered hierarchy to focusing on motoring as an experience—a shift, in de Certeau's terms, from a regulatory organizational system to a liberatory transformative use.

## 4. The Singer

The Woolfs' acquisition of a second-hand Singer was significant not only for increasing their mobility; it also functioned as a turning point, prompting Virginia to move from identifying the car with an imperialist commodified culture to reconstructing the vehicle as a liberatory trope for non-linear thought and narrative form. Though inevitably implicated in the normative social values of wealth and status, Woolf's subsequent fictive encoding of the car in *Orlando* simultaneously resists such values by linking the car to a physical liberation of female space and to a freer mode of articulating the self and cultural history.

Virginia was the first of the two to begin to drive, and within two weeks she had taken copious notes on starting the engine (*D*3 147), boasted of being "rather good at gears now" (*L*3 398), and joked about the boy she "knocked ... very gently off his bicycle" (*L*3 400). The sheer number of references in her letters and diaries testify to her excitement. "You won't mind talking for 24 hours on end, I hope?" she writes to Ethel

Sands. "It will be mostly about motor cars. I can think of nothing else" (*L*3 400). On August 10, she states, "Soon we shall look back at our pre-motor days as we do now at our days in the caves," and claims that she "shall be expert" at driving before mid-September (*D*3 151).

Woolf's excitement was due in part to the physical challenge, in part to the prospect of being able to travel "thousands of miles" (*D*3 147), but right from the start the motion of the car also signified a mental release. Waiting for the Singer to arrive, Woolf speculated on the car's ability to "expand that curious thing, the map of the world in ones mind" (*D*3 147). She noted its capacity for redefining social relations: "It will I think demolish loneliness & may of course imperil complete privacy." But perhaps most important, it provided a trope for mental speed and freedom: "All images are now tinged with driving a motor. Here I think of letting my engine work, with my clutch out (*D*3 149).

In a humorous way, Woolf also seized upon conventional mechanical discourse to mock her culture's inscription of normative gendered identity. Writing to Vanessa in 1928, Woolf exclaims, "I can't believe your amazing stories of the Male and Female parts of the Renault" (*L*3 463) and relating the story to Julian Bell, she writes, "Nessa sends me astonishingly indecent details about the Renault. It cant go, she says, because its hermaphrodite" (*L*3 464). Her parodic musings over whether "the French sexualise their engines" indicate her awareness of the way technological development is constructed through the surrounding social discourse and she manages to mock both the normative sexualization of car parts and the cultural dynamic that situates women as passive in the context of male-designed, manufactured, labeled and advertised equipment.

But Virginia's driving was also positioned within a conflicted space. On July 22, while Virginia was writing to Ethel Sands that she'd "rather have a gift for motoring than anything" (*L*3 400), Vita was writing to Harold that Virginia "sailed off" in the car for a driving lesson and "every five minutes Leonard would say, 'I suppose Virginia will be all right'" (182-3). Vita asserts her own confidence in Virginia and gestures humorously toward Virginia's passionate involvement with the car, remarking how she (Vita) and Leonard "got back to the trysting place and there was Virginia taking an intelligent interest in the works of the car." But Leonard's fears proved either more prophetic or more powerful.

In Quentin Bell's account, it was driving through a hedge that made Virginia decide to remain thereafter in the passenger seat (129-30). But if we see Vita's and Leonard's conflicting narratives as indicative of a larger framework at hand, Virginia's decision seems less simple—and rather more sad. Virginia's extraordinary excitement and enthusiasm about learning to drive may well have been subdued by Leonard's view of her limited capabilities, and the sudden collapse of her high moment of being able to discuss "nothing but cars" suggests a discouragement whose implications were profound. After September, Virginia makes no

further reference to her driving; nor—despite all the energy expended in its anticipation—does she refer to her decision to give it up. Indeed her retreat from her own (and Vita's) victorious scenarios seems confirmed when, once Leonard takes over the wheel, Virginia becomes noticeably passive as a passenger.

But just as de Certeau's railway traveler subverts the logical grid with liberating dreams, so Virginia converted her physical passivity into inner action. In Leonard's words, "travel had a curious and deep effect upon her .... she fell into a strange state of passive alertness .... Virginia strained off and stored in her mind those sounds and sights, echoes and visions, which months afterwards would become food for her imagination and her art" (178). Yet another tactical maneuver, then, was Virginia's transposition of her anticipated freedom, redirecting it from her life—where it had been blocked—into her writing—where it blossomed. As references to driving the car are abruptly dropped from her diary, she writes instead, "I drive my pen through one article after another" (*D*3 157-8). This same entry contains the first mention of a book in which Vita would appear as Orlando; and where Virginia the driver had failed, Orlando succeeds admirably.

## 5. The Car and *Orlando*

"'Why don't you look where you're going to?... Put your hand out can't you?'" (299), Orlando shouts to passers-by as "the motor car shot, swung, squeezed, and slid, for she was an expert driver" (306). Conflating the images of the reckless female at the wheel on the one hand and the "expert driver" on the other, Woolf's depiction of Orlando signals a radical intervention of the car in a significant cultural debate.

In September 1926, after a heated argument with Leonard about spending money on the garden (his intention) as opposed to travel (her desire), Woolf wrote, "Too many women give way on this point [their freedom]" and continued, "With my motor I shall have more mobility" (*D*3 112). According to Michael Berger, after the 1920s—following such developments as the electric starter—one of the anticipated effects of the car was to further female independence, particularly for middle-class women. But such freedom prompted a reaction from those eager to maintain the traditional social roles that required women's presence in the home. The fear of changing social values occasioned a resistance to women's driving which, Berger argues, was responsible for the emergence of the 'women driver' stereotype and the ridicule that accompanied it" (70). Though Berger focuses on the American scene, similar gender tensions surrounding the car are evident in England. A 1928 article in *The Morning Post* entitled "Women CAN Sell Cars" resembles articles cited by Berger in American magazines: a female writer attempts to undo the psychological conditioning linking the car—or, in this case, "motor salesmanship"—"exclusively, and almost by natural right" to men. In this context,

though culture has aided Orlando by equipping her automobile with a "self-starter," her expertise at the wheel functions as a challenge to the prevailing gendered demarcation of separate spheres. Thus while still encoding the class and economic implications of car ownership—Orlando, after all, uses her car for a shopping expedition at a department store—Orlando's driving also functions as a liberatory feminist trope.

In similar liberatory fashion, Woolf uses the car's movement to replace the traditional "formal railway line of sentence" with a modernist representation of the mind. The speed of the car and the rapidly-changing scenes create a perception of fragmentation and multiplicity:

> People split off the pavement ... Children ran out ... Here a procession with banners upon which was written in great letters "Ra—Un," but what else? ... Applejohn and Applebed, Undert—Nothing could be seen whole or read from start to finish ... After twenty minutes the body and mind were like scraps of torn paper tumbling from a sack and, indeed, the process of motoring fast out of London so much resembles the chopping up small of body and mind ... that it is an open question in what sense Orlando can be said to have existed at the present moment. (306-7)

The fragmentation of the view imitates the perceptual juxtapositions of modernism and leads Orlando to actively engage the dialogic nature of her multiple selves. "Changing her selves as quickly as she drove," Orlando soon becomes savvy to the challenge of picking the right Orlando for the moment at hand. When she shifts "her gears admirably," both the literal sense of operating a vehicle and the allusion to the requisite mental adjustment are at play. Furthermore, the fragmentation passes to the perceiver the tasks of constructing continuity or negotiating change. Though the farmyards and cows of nature are no more indicative of the real than the city streets, Orlando creates a semblance of wholeness from the continuity of the "green screens" of grass as she whizzes by—just as the "Oak Tree" (Sackville-West's *The Land*) becomes the unifying device for the selves who are called "Orlando." Finally, motoring—a way of organizing physical space—implies, like the railway, a narrative structure, so that Orlando's progress by car through England serves as well as a trope for the reader's fragmented, pluralistic, multi-dimensional, but ultimately unifying journey through Woolf's text.

As an organizational system, car travel thus inscribes a movement that is self-directed and flexible as opposed to the disciplined punctuality and specified beginnings and endings implicit in railway organization. Leonard too reflected on the way that motoring allowed them to escape the "straight and parallel lines" of the railway, celebrating the process- rather than goal-oriented nature of holidaying by car: "It is only of this kind of travel, the travel by road, that Montaigne's saying ... is really true—it is not the arrival,

but the journey that matters" (182). And for Virginia, this freer organization of physical space literally offered a new access to history, giving her a new flexibility and freedom in her relation to time:

> What I like ... about motoring is the sense it gives one of lighting accidentally ... upon scenes which would have gone on, have always gone on, will go on, unrecorded, save for this chance glimpse. Then it seems to me I am allowed to see the heart of the world uncovered for a moment. It strikes me that the hymn singing in the flats went on precisely so in Cromwell's time. (*D*3 153)

This diary entry was written August 21, 1927; on September 20, Virginia wrote about conceiving Vita as Orlando; by October 5, she had determined the book's historical scope. By October 22, her passion for talking about "nothing but cars" had shifted to doing "nothing, nothing, nothing else, for a fortnight" but making up *Orlando*.

We are not proposing motoring as the origin of the narrative structure or historical mapping of *Orlando*. But we are suggesting that the meaning of *Orlando* is bound up with cultural meanings and that Woolf was both produced by, and producer of, the cultural text of her time. The stage-coach, the railway, the car, the airplane, and the spacecraft have participated in the larger transformations of our physical, social, and mental systems; in the summer of 1927, the motor car can be clearly heard among the heteroglossia in the texts of British culture and Virginia Woolf.

### Notes

[1] We would like here to acknowledge the contributions of a sixth member of the graduate seminar, Robin Gambhir, who was unable to continue in the collaborative project beyond the end of the course.

[2] *The Times* was a logical choice given its clear presence in the Woolf household and the publication of Woolf's reviews in the *TLS*. Virginia subscribed to *The Morning Post* during the summer months at Rodmell and makes specific reference to reading it on Sept. 20, 1927 (*D*3 156). She not only published in *Vogue* at this time, but in 1926—during the General Strike—she allowed Dorothy Todd, the editor of *Vogue*, to choose an outfit for her to wear (*D*3 78, 91).

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